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## GHOSTS, ANIMALS, OR ANGELS. CHRISTIAN STORY-TELLING IN A MODERN WORLD

*Fred van Lieburg*

*Diane, a young Christian university student, was home for the summer. One evening she returned late from a visit to her friends. She walked quite alone through an alley and asked God to keep her from harm and danger. Halfway down the alley she noticed a man, looking like he was waiting for her. She prayed for protection and instantly a comfortable feeling of quietness and security surrounded her, as if someone was walking with her. She walked right past the man and arrived home safely. The following day she read in the paper that a young girl had been raped in the same alley, just twenty minutes after she had been there. She decided to go down to the police station. She could identify the man at a line-up. The man was arrested. She asked the policeman if he would ask the man why he had not attacked her. His answer was as simple as it was surprising: "Because she wasn't alone. She had two tall men walking on either side of her."*

This story was mentioned in an edifying book on angel apparitions, published in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1982 (MacDonald 1982: 75). It is the oldest variant I know of a story that is still circulating around the whole world, especially in orthodox Protestant circles. In the following I am going to give some examples that became known to me from folkloristic publications, from internet messages and from oral communication. I will also treat the classic story-type of Guardian Angels, of which in my opinion the aforementioned version is a modern transformation. In some older wonder-stories that are particularly widespread in Dutch Pietistic circle, pious girls do not play the main role but rather reverend pastors. In addition, I will compare these with some variants from English Methodism, in which pastors are also protected, but not by angels, but by riders on horse, stray dogs or even mysterious ghosts.<sup>1</sup>

<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol20/ghosts.pdf>

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Finally, I will draw some parallels with the story of “The Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Person”, that was recently studied by the American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand (2000: 123–136). His starting point in research was the version of the story with which the well-known evangelist Billy Graham started his bestseller “God’s Secret Agents” (1975: 2–3). Brunvand was able to track this story-type to a late 19th century ghost-story, but could not explain the religious transformation into an angel’s apparition. I think that my research on the classic Guardian Angels can cast new light upon this question, although this will pull us somewhat away from the modern stories on protected girls. Meanwhile, even just the thematical and chronological parallels between the various story-types reflect the creativity of Christian story-telling that is still very much alive and therefore deserves the continuing attention and strong cooperation of historians and folklorists.

#### **NEW STORIES COLLECTED BY FOLKLORISTS**

*The story was the talk of the day in a Christian school in the Swedish town of Borås. A young girl from an evangelical congregation was on her way back home after a party. It was late and she was a bit afraid where she was going alone. She wanted to return home as soon as possible and decided to take a short way through a park. From a distance she saw a man, looking at her near a tree. She prayed to God He would be with her and protect her. She was praying intently the whole way through the park and was very relieved when she returned home unharmed. After several days she learned that a girl was raped in the park – just a little while after she had crossed it. She thought of the man she had seen, and decided to go to the police. When the pictures of the police register were shown to her, she recognized the man again by his penetrating look. The police told her that he was arrested as a suspected person. After the man had confessed his crime, the police asked him why he had let the first girl walk by. He replied: “She was accompanied two men dressed in white who walked behind her.”*

The schoolgirls who told this story were sure it was true – they had heard it from someone who was a very close friend of the girl in the

story. They considered the incident as a proof of God's answer to prayers. One classmate, however, was in doubt. Indeed she found it a really fine story – the kind you wished was true and credible. But she had once read that one should be careful with such anecdotes. She also knew somebody who collected and studied these kind of stories. She sent him a letter in which she passed along the abovementioned story and asked him if he knew perhaps more about its origins.

At that time it was still a new story for this scholar, the Swedish folklorist Bengt af Klintberg. But half a year later, in February 1991, he talked to some high school classes in Tibro in Västergötland. He told them of the girl and the guardian angels in the park and asked if anyone recognised this story. A boy replied immediately. He had been in catechism with a pastor of the Lutheran state church in the village of Å (between Göteborg and Uddevalla). When the pastor once dealt with “quick prayers” that are heard immediately, he gave an illustration by telling the next story (Klintberg 1994: 282–284).

*There was a girl who had read in the newspaper of the day before about somebody who had to go through the Schloßwald in Göteborg. The newspaper said that a lot of people had been killed there. But she thought: it does not matter; I will go through nevertheless! When she went through the forest, a man came forward and she prayed. Then he only looked at her and she went on, returned home and went to sleep. The next day she read in the newspaper that ... The rest of the story, said the faithful school-boy to the collector of legends, was exactly the same as with that of the girl and the guardian angels in the park. It is worth praying, the pastor had said.*

The Swedish folklorist had found his second version of the story. Meanwhile, a German professor of folklore, Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, was also hunting for new contemporary legends in his language area. Already in the same year, in November 1991, he recorded what a young teacher in Enger near Herford had heard from colleagues in the Westphalian town of Espelkamp (Brednich 1993: 138). Many Christians live there who do not belong to established churches but to different free churches or sects. The town itself has its origin in an ammunition store that was established in the middle of the forest after the Second World War. That is why it used to be called

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“Mittwald”. Even today, Espelkamp is surrounded by thick forest. There it had really happened, said the teachers, some time in the year 1990. A girl from the Mennonite congregation went here at night and passed a man, who seemed to waiting to rape her. The girl went down on her knees and prayed loudly to God. After that the man left her and disappeared in the bushes. Several days later he interfered with another woman and was rounded up. In the police interrogation he was asked why he spared the pious girl. He gave a snappy reply: “She was not alone!”

### **INTERNET REPORTS BY FOLKLORISTS**

Nowadays, there are several folklore societies using the Internet to communicate about old and new stories, anecdotes and rumours that are told or written all over the world. On a website that is specially devoted to wonder-stories of Christian content, a story appeared in July 1998. The incident supposedly happened in Australia, not far from Sydney, more precisely in the Broadway Tunnel. This connects the town with a major business area, thus it is very busy during the day, but pretty near deserted at night. A lady from a local charismatic congregation had worked late one night, and rather than take the major detour above ground she risked the long underground pedestrian tunnel. Halfway through, she noticed an unsavoury looking character leaning against the wall looking towards her. Feeling unsafe, she prayed and prayed as she walked past. Next morning it was big news that around 2 AM, not long after she went through the tunnel, a woman had been raped in the tunnel. She reported the man she had seen that night to the police, and from the description she gave a known sex offender was arrested. When asked why he had not touched the lady who had reported him, he could not remember any lone woman in the tunnel at that time, but he did mention that one lady, accompanied by two very large, tough-looking men, one on either side of her, was the only other lady he saw there all that night (see Ship).

At an American website, the story of ‘The Heavenly Bodyguards’ was nominated the ‘legend of the week’ in March 2000. The storyteller said he had heard the story dozens of times in different contexts. This time it was a student of a Midwestern college, Sally, the

principal figure in a story with a very dramatic course. She fell asleep in the library, sweating for an exam she had failed the first time. She awoke after midnight, was let out by a janitor, and although she could have used the service of the campus police, she decided to walk alone in dark. She was anxious and prayed silently the whole way, "Oh, Lord, protect me. Place your angels around me". Sometimes the echo of her own footsteps sounded like another pair of footsteps. She had made it safely to the door of her dorm when she heard a blood-curdling scream from behind her. She ran inside and called the police, but they came too late. The next day she heard that at that place a girl was not only raped, but murdered, too. The offender was arrested, and of course Sally was an important witness for the police. Although she was very shocked, she asked if she could speak with the murderer. "Why didn't you kill me?" was her curious question. He replied, "How stupid do you think I am? Do you think I would attack a girl with two huge guys on her arm?" (see Urban)

#### **DUTCH EVIDENCE FROM PIOUS CIRCLES**

It is obvious that stories about bodyguards of young women are circulating in America, Australia, Sweden and Germany. I myself am familiar with the situation in the Netherlands, where similar stories were told in the past decade and are still told today in Orthodox Protestant circles. A Christian journalist described in a 1994 book about angels in the midst of people that in the previous year a woman was raped in a dark alley in North Holland. The police sought witnesses who possibly had seen the violator. Another young woman reported at the office and said that she had gone through the same alley around the same time, passing a man who however had not troubled her. Later she confronted the offender himself. "Why did you rape the other woman and not me?" The answer appalled her: "Because you were not alone, two men went beside you." (Leijenaar 1994: 75)

A Reformed pastor published a series of articles on angels in a Reformed weekly journal in 1997. He also made an allusion to a failed rape when he gave an illustration of how divine protection can still be experienced very concretely in his opinion. "Recently I also heard

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in our circle how someone was wonderfully protected in such a way, that others who did not have good intentions, saw that the person was not alone.” (Schuurman 1997). This pastor worked on Alblasserwaard, an island in South Holland with a large Strict Reformed population.

In the same year, a pastor of the Strict Baptists in England received a letter from a Dutch friend, reporting ‘the providence of the Lord for a young girl in some village in our country.’ This girl went every day on her bike to school, travelling a deserted road for some miles. One morning, half-way to school, a car appeared with two men, who wanted to attack the girl. In great fear, but praying for God’s help, she went on. The men remained sitting in the car! The next day she read in the newspaper that two girls were raped by two men on the road in question. Two suspects were already picked up, but denied any participation in the crime. The police sought witnesses and the girl reported a damning testimony at the office. The men confessed and explained why they did not trouble the girl that passed before. “Of course not, she was not alone, two men were beside her, we could not do anything.”

The aforementioned English pastor published the story in a church magazine under a motto with an allusion to Psalm 91:11, ‘The Lord is still the same in his providence, also in 1997 he commands his angels to guard his children on all their ways’ (Buss 1998: 17). This article was given by a teacher of English at a Dutch Strict Reformed high school as a translation exercise for his pupils. Then a pupil forwarded his translation outside the school, and finally it was put on a bulletin board of a similar Reformed high school in Amersfoort. In such schools there are hundreds of teenagers from the surrounding region, who cycle in groups together as much as possible between home and school. The girls in particular can be recognised outwardly by their skirts, for wearing pants is prohibited according to Deuteronomy 22:5. The story of the wonderful saving of pious girls has an encouraging purpose in this context. The actuality can even intensify the feeling of dependence or destroy the trust in God. In the beginning of 1999, such a cycling Reformed girl, the thirteen year old Sybine Jansons, was violated and killed in a forest near her house and was found in a ditch after some weeks.

The adventures of this story illustrate the way in which a modern legend may be spread, as well as the function it may have as a 'true story'. In the past years I have heard the story of girls guarded by angels three times from different sources, but in every case from people who knew that I was doing historical research in this field. One event dealt with a girl in the town of Delft, in the other cases girls from the Veluwe (a wooded region in Gelderland, known as a stronghold of Reformed culture) were protected miraculously. Names were not mentioned and the 'friend of a friend' was said to be the source in every story. Moreover, although the stories were presented as unique events, one notices the similarity with an older tradition of Dutch Protestantism, concerning the 'Guardian Angels of the Rev. Smytegelt'. That was the story I was researching and which I will now discuss further.

#### **THE CLASSIC GUARDIAN ANGELS**

From 1695 until his death in 1739, Bernardus Smytegelt was pastor in Middelburg, the capital of the province of Zeeland. He was one of the most important representatives of Pietism in the Dutch Reformed Church of the 18th century (Brecht & Ackva & Depperman 1995: 546–550. For a contemporary biography on Smytegelt see: Beeke 1985). Smytegelt was a passionate penance preacher who would fulminate against the half-hearted rulers and the indifferent church people, but also a fine preacher of comfort who encouraged troubled souls and edified pious Christians. He was a 'living saint', who remained beloved after his death because of his many sermons that were written down and published by audients. They are still read today by individual Pietistic believers and also read at strict Reformed services. He lived in Middelburg at the Singel near the St. Joris Bridge, which was later popularly called the 'Smytegelt Bridge' or the 'Angels Bridge'. This is connected to a miracle-story, which is spread in Zeeland and in Orthodox Protestant circles all over the Netherlands:

*One night, as it often happened, Rev. Smytegelt was called out of his sleep by the knock on the door. He was asked to go immediately to a member of his congregation, who had suddenly become ill. The 'Old Man of the Singel' quickly dressed and went on his*



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*way. It was storming heavily and he met nobody. Just near the bridge he passed two men, who seemed unworried by the weather – apparently sailors going to their ship. Finally he arrived at the stated address, but to his surprise there was no light burning. He had to knock persistently before someone opened the door. He was told that there must be a mistake. No one had called for him at all.*

*Two years later he was woken up again in the middle of the night. He was urged to go with the messenger, for someone who had been his bitter enemy for years was on the verge of death. Smytegelt hurried and soon faced the sick man, who revealed with sobs that he had lured him out of his home that stormy night with the intention of throwing him over the bridge railing with the help of a friend. However, when Smytegelt approached the bridge, the minister of God was clearly surrounded by angels before, behind and beside him, guarding him with flaming swords. His friend had seen nothing, but was so impressed by his fright that he came to conversion, too.*

This story was published for the first time in 1933 in a collection of legends in Zeeland, edited by Mr. Jacques Sinninghe and his wife, who were both folklorists. They referred to a report from the regional collector of popular tales, according to whom the story was written down from oral communication (Sinninghe & Sinninghe 1933: 207–208). Mr. Sinninghe published collections of legends from several provinces with his wife and included the story of the Guardian Angels in his own international catalogue of Dutch fairytales, sagas and legends (Sinninghe 1943: 138). In the latter year the fourth and last volume of a Frisian series of popular stories was published by the young folklorist Sytse van der Molen. In this volume another story of the Guardian Angels appeared in a much extended version but with exactly the same story pattern. It did not mention the pastor's name, but only the place where he lived (van der Molen 1943: 446–447). Since then, local historians have associated the story with the Rev. Henricus Muntingh, who served the flock of Marrum in 1797–1810 and who was popular in the wider region (Algra 1958: 92–93).

The same story about Guardian Angels of different pastors circulates completely independent of these folkloristic collections. It was

published in printed form already in 1920, and 1921 in the necrologies of a little-known Reformed pastor as well as of a famous evangelical preacher (Anonymous necrologies). In oral tradition, all sorts of pastors from different churches and groups played the main role. Collectors of popular tales in the province of Friesland recorded 32 variants, as mentioned by Jurjen van der Kooi in his thorough inventory in 1984 (van der Kooi 1984: 360–361). Meanwhile, I have found double that number of stories, in which indeed more than 30 people from Dutch church history are said to have had guardian angels.

Most cases feature reverend preachers or exemplary pious people from the period between 1840 and 1960. They belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church, in particular to its orthodox wing, or to one of the smaller Reformed denominations that originated from two separatist movements, the Secession of 1834 and the ‘Doleantie’ of 1886. Besides this, the ‘corpus sanctorum’ embraces a significant contingent of representatives of international Revival or Holiness movements. Thus, in general, it concerns the current of Pietism, its older – confessional and ecclesiastical – traditions as well as its younger – more evangelical and charismatic – variants. This is not only true for the Netherlands, but for the adjacent German Lower Rhine region, too. There the story was still circling in 1965, featuring the ‘Reformed Saint’ Jakob Gerhard Engels, pastor in Nümbrecht from 1854 until his death in 1897, a leading figure in a Revival movement in the Homburgerland. A frequently drunken doctor tried to murder him one night about 1885, but it was prevented thanks to a ‘white man’ beside Engels (Kauffmann 1965: 81).

It is interesting that in the Dutch tradition the story of Guardian Angels it was projected back onto figures in the past, although it had apparently not been spread before the first decades of the 20th century. Except for the locally well-known pastor Muntingh, this is particularly true for the Pietist ‘Father’ Smytegelt. However, there is another clear example of posthumous sanctification in Protestant story-telling. In 1947, a church historian wrote that in the village of Zoetermeer in South Holland stories were still circulating about the Rev. Jodocus van Lodenstein, who had served there from 1644 until 1650. He was – just like Smytegelt – a pillar of Reformed Pietism (Brecht 1993: 783–788; see also: Schroeder 2001). As an

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unmarried ascetic he lead a respectable life. Moreover, he was a gifted poet, and his spiritual songs were eagerly sung at pious meetings. One of the oral traditions deals with 'two men, who wanted to attack Van Lodenstein outside the village, but abandoned the attempt when seeing, miraculously, not one but three men who set themselves against them' (de Vrijer 1947: 69). Is this the oldest case of the angel story or is it the projection of a Protestant miracle-story on a pillar of the more than 300 years old Pietistic movement? Orthodox Protestant believers credit the first option; folklorists and historians tend to support the latter solution.

Meanwhile, the story of Guardian Angels was in the Netherlands mainly known in connection with the Rev. Smytegelt. Since the publication of the *Zeeuwsch Sagenboek* in 1933 it has been incorporated into numerous edifying books and magazines and mentioned, extended and exaggerated in sermons, catechisations, school stories and personal conversations. In this way Smytegelt has become the crystallized figure of the legend. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that in the future this role will be taken over by another person. In 1983, the Dutch doctor H. C. Moolenburgh wrote a bestseller about angels that was translated into several languages (Moolenburgh 1983, translated into English in 1985; a sequel to this book, including several other variants of the angel story, was published: Moolenburgh 1991, translated into English in 1992). In that book he also mentioned the saving of Cornelis Breet, baker and evangelist in the poor and whore quarter in the navy village of Den Helder. He was supposedly protected by angels from a murderous attack on a bridge in about 1900, nearly in the same way as was the Rev. Smytegelt in about 1700, including the later conversion and confession of the offender. The story of the 'Late Breet' was not only printed all over the world, but was also revitalized in a public magazine accompanying the American television series *Touched by an Angel*, shown on the Dutch Evangelical Broadcast in the autumn of 2000 (Engelen 2000: 12–13).

In another article I have tried to deduce the origin of the story of the guardian angels from older story types or story motives – in the Bible as well as in medieval example collections or legends of saints, and in the literature of Reformation, Pietism and Methodism (van Lieburg 2003a). More fruitful than searching for the roots of a story

in times long past is the search for parallels that circulated in more or less similar regions and subcultures in the same period, in this case the late 19th until the late 20th century. The oldest variants of the classic Guardian Angels story that I know were published by a German folklorist, Otto Schell, in a bundle of Bergian legends in 1897. They dealt with anonymous pastors in Wichlinghausen and Wülfrath and were written down in Barmen and Elberfeld not long before that year (Schell 1897: 183–184 (Nr. 109: Die geheimnisvollen Begleiter), 205–206 (Nr. 155: Engel als Beschützer)). It is remarkable that the oral tradition documented by Schell, which remained unknown to the Dutch folklorists until recently, presents a complete and ripe form, making it possible that the story might be much older. That is also indicated by the fact that a related story type was already widespread in England at that time.

#### **ENGLISH VARIANTS**

The English author Augustus Hare, well-known for his travel journals about the Mediterranean countries, kept diaries since 1871, which contain many supernatural stories. Among them there is a story that Hare heard at a dinner in July 1880 from a certain Mr. Synge who declared his belief in ghostly apparitions. He told of a clergyman in Somersetshire who had ridden to the bank and drawn out all the money for his society for the poor. He was taking it back with him, when he became aware of another horseman riding by his side, who did not speak, and who, at a certain point of the road beyond a hollow, disappeared. In that hollow highwaymen, who knew the clergyman was coming with the money, were waiting to attack him, but they refrained, “for there are two of them”, they said. “It was his guardian angel,” the storyteller added (Hare 1900: 285–286; also in Hare 1953: 163–164).

In January 1885, Hare heard another story remarkably similar to the previous one (Hare 1900: 425; also in Hare 1953: 188). It was told by his friend Mr. Wharton, who had heard it from a certain Mr. Bond in his youth when he was in a little inn at Ayscliffe. The person in the story was also mentioned by name: he was Johnnie Greenwood, a chaplain from Swanclyffe in the 19th century.

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*One night Greenwood had to ride a mile through some woods to do a visit. At the entrance to the woods a large black dog joined him, and pattered along by his side. He could not make out where it came from, but it never left him, and when the woods grew so dark that he could not see it, he still heard it pattering beside him. When he emerged from the woods, the dog had disappeared, and he could not tell where it had gone. The chaplain paid his visit, and set out to return the same way. At the entrance to the woods, the dog joined him, and pattered along beside him as before; but it never touched him, and he never spoke to it, and again, as he emerged from the woods, it disappeared. Years later, two condemned prisoners in York goal told the chaplain that they had intended to rob and murder Greenwood that night in the woods, but that he had a large dog with him, and when they saw that, they felt that Johnnie and the dog together would be too much for them.*

Augustus Hare published his diaries in 1900. According to the British folklorist Katherine Briggs, stories like the aforementioned were widespread around that time. She herself heard the variant of the black dog story from an old clergyman, a certain Mr. Hosey in London in 1910 when she was a child. A similar story was told in Yorkshire about a well-known non-conformist minister who had been making a charitable collection in a lonely part of the country. Briggs does not mention any name or source in connection with this case (Briggs 1971: 14–15, 531). However, an extensive story about a Methodist preacher from Wales can be found in a collection of legends of the Severn Valley, published in 1925 (Williams 1925: 11–20). The preacher was guarded by a rider when he himself returned home in the night on his horse with the proceeds of a campaign of several months for an extension fund of his religious movement. A few years later he heard at a deathbed that he had escaped from a hold-up. This preacher, William Jenkins, a disciple of John Wesley, was the leader of a successful Methodist mission in Wales in 1800. This is another case where a circulating legend seems to be attached to a charismatic personality of earlier times (van Lieburg 2003b).

A translation of the latter story appeared in 1934 in a Dutch folklore journal as an English variant of the story on the Guardian

Angels of Rev. Smytegelt that had been published shortly before (Rasch 1934: 172–176). The clear analogy of both story-types is striking. The mysterious rider on the horse it seems, can to be replaced by one or more angel figures. An important difference remains, however, that in the English variant, but not in the Dutch version, the supernatural helpers allow themselves to be seen by the person being guarded. In addition, there seems to have circulated another variant of the story in the Anglo-Saxon world, in which the clergymen afterwards hear that they supposedly were protected against a dangerous attack in that way and that their offenders saw a phantom that was not immediately interpreted to be an angel. Two such oral traditions are found in the *Ghost Book of Lord Halifax*, who collected stories about supernatural apparitions. His material was published in 1937, the events I mentioned supposedly occurred about 1890 (Lindley 1946: 125–128).

One of the latter type of stories, in which Bishop Edward King is the central figure, is known in several versions, and their contents as well as their distribution are illustrative of the social function and present actuality of such stories. Edward King, bishop of Lincoln from 1885 until his death in 1910, was a representative of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement. He was a charismatic personality and an evangelical-ecumenical Christian with great respect for Methodism. According to three independent testimonies he escaped as a young pastor from an attempted murder after a false call at night to visit a sick person. This murder was planned by someone King later met in a jail on his deathbed. The event was not only described in *Ghost Book of Lord Halifax* and in a biography later devoted to King (Lord Elton 1958: 138–140), but is still known in oral tradition among the diocese officials of Lincoln. When I contacted them last year with respect to my research, they had not only ignored the older written versions of the story about King, but were also surprised by the Dutch Reformed reports of nearly the same angel story. However, they sent me the text of a leaflet which was hung in a chapel of the Lincoln Cathedral in 1997, next to a picture depicting ‘The Reformed’, exhibited as ‘a prayer in these days of violence and growing anxiety in our communities’:

*The following story is told of Bishop Edward King: One evening, he received an urgent call to visit someone who was dying. He*

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*left his house, alone, and set out for the address he had been given, but on arriving found nobody in and the place in darkness. Puzzled, he returned home. Some days later, two youths came to his door. Agitated, they wanted to make a clean breast of something, so King let them in and heard them. They told him that it was a hoax and that they had rigged it up in order to catch him alone and rob him. Ever since, they had felt a pressure to come and confess. "I was quite alone and unprotected." "No", they said, "we were about to make our move when we realised that there was someone walking beside you who stayed with you all the way, so we dared not set about you. Now we have come to ask your forgiveness."*

## ANGELS OR GHOSTS

The story about the Anglican bishop has now brought us to the borderline between Protestantism and Catholicism. Although in the Catholic tradition I did not find story types that look in any way like the pietistic and evangelical Guardian Angel stories, there are stories with similar motifs and the same time of origin or circulation. An Austrian example lexicon from 1906, intended for clergymen to illustrate sermons and catechisations, includes in addition to stories from the Bible, early Christian writers, medieval saint legends or all kinds of historical sources, also 'living oral traditions'. Under the keyword 'angels', two similar stories are found, of which I will give a summary of the one that supposedly happened around 1900 in a village in the Tiroler Unterinn valley (Scherer & Lampert 1906: 857–858).

*One night the bell was suddenly rung by a curate. An unfamiliar man was at the door and asked him to go quickly with the sacrament to a dying person. The priest hurried in the church to take the host, while the stranger took his lantern and conducted the curate. Having arrived at the destination, the wonderful guardian disappeared at once. The house was completely dark and the farmer was amazed by the knocks at the door. He answered that nobody was ill, much less going to die. Suddenly it came to the farmer's mind that a poor beggar had come in the evening and now lay in the stable. The priest checked if he was in need and found him already in agony. The curate heard his confession,*



*gave him the holy sacraments and blessed his soul. Then the beggar explained in pious trust what had happened. "I worshipped the Holy Barbara every day and asked her for the intercession I would not die without the holy sacraments. Undoubtedly this patron saint has now sent my guardian angel, to order you to me."*

I think this story is not only related to the protestant guardian angels, but also to the story type of 'The ghost in search of help for a dying person', which has occupied folklorists for a long time. In the oldest known variants, a clergyman and a dying person are not involved with a guardian angel but with another supernatural being. This story caused a sensation in some Russian newspapers in 1890. A priest in St. Petersburg visited a young man one day. He said he was sent to him by a woman to give the sacraments to a dying person. The man explained he was alive and not sick, but the priest recognized a portrait on the wall as that of the woman who had summoned him. The young man, in great surprise, said it was a portrait of his dead mother. He decided to take communion, and, the story concludes, 'that evening he lay dead' (Edgerton 1968: 31–41; 1988: 145–150).

This story, characterized by the detail of a mysterious messenger whose portrait is seen later, has been found by folklorists in many variants in England, America and Canada. In one of them, parallel to the aforementioned story of the Russian Orthodox priest, an Anglican pastor is called to a dying soul. With regard to my aforementioned night stories from Protestant Revival movements, it is interesting that there is also a variant about a country doctor who was also a Methodist lay preacher. He was summoned to the bedside of an old couple by the ghost of their dead daughter (Bennett 1984: 56). Although this latter variant lacks the motive of identification by a portrait, it makes a bridge to the many 'secular' variants, in which not clergymen but doctors are the helpers at the sickbed and in which not angels but ghosts appear in the form of old women or young girls as messengers. Here I cite the text that was very widespread and that was initially found in an issue of *Reader's Digest*:

*Dr. S. W. Mitchell, a celebrated Philadelphia neurologist, had gone to bed after an exceptionally tiring day. Suddenly he was awak-*



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*ened by someone knocking on his door. Opening it he found a little girl, poorly dressed and deeply upset. She told him her mother was very sick and asked him if he would please come with her. It was a bitterly cold, snowy night, but though he was bone tired, Dr. Mitchell dressed and followed the girl. He found the mother desperately ill with pneumonia. After arranging for medical care, he complimented the sick woman on the intelligence and persistence of her little daughter. The woman looked at him strangely and then said, "My daughter died a month ago." She added, "Her shoes and coat are in the clothes closet there." Dr. Mitchell, amazed and perplexed, went to the closet and opened the door. There hung the very coat worn by the little girl who had brought him to tend to her mother. It was warm and dry and could not possibly have been out in the wintry night. (Graham 1975: 2–3)*

It was this story that the American evangelist Billy Graham retold in his 1975 book on God's secret agents. Meanwhile we know that this legend originates from the mentioned Silas Weir Mitchell himself. He was not only a famous doctor, but the author of many books on science, fiction and poetry in the late 19th century. He was particularly interested in spiritism and the supernatural world. The aforementioned ghost story was published already in 1891 in one of his novels, but it appears from preserved letters that he later applied it to himself and told to many friends in the I-form. No doubt Graham was not aware of this origin, when he inserted the story in his book. Yet he added a suggestive element: "Could the doctor have been called in the hour of desperate need by an angel who appeared as this woman's young daughter? Was this the work of God's angels on behalf of the sick woman?" Rhetorical questions that the popular preacher would surely answer with a yes. We find this story not without reason at the very beginning of his book that has been translated in many languages and has reached hundreds of thousands of readers (Graham 1975: 3; Brunvand 2000: 123).

## CONCLUSION

Jan Harold Brunvand, the folklorist I mentioned in the introduction of this article, was right: Billy Graham gave a Christian twist to a genuine ghost story. Nevertheless, this ghost story seems to

originate from a broader religious tradition of storytelling that contains the same or interchangeable motifs and therefore seems to be closely allied. The variants of the story 'The Ghost in Search for Help for a Dying Person' and the Catholic variant added by myself, show several combinations since the late 19th century: respectively a clergyman and an angel, a clergyman and a ghost, a doctor and a ghost, a doctor and an angel. All stories, however, have a supernatural being, a benefited person and a professional helper – preferably everything in the context of late hours.

The same flexibility characterizes the story types of which I called the one the classic Guardian Angels and the other a modern transformation of the same. The classic variant deals with clergymen called by name and respected in their area and for religiousness, who hit the road, sometimes with money in their bag. In the modern variants they are replaced by common but pious girls, and sexual violence is inserted instead of personal antipathy or a cowardly hold-up. Although the story is accommodated to present circumstances, the old story has not been 'secularised': the piety of the young women is just as essential for the stories as the holiness of the clergymen. The modern variants are even more 'religious' than many classic versions, in which the angels (or 'white men' as indication for heavenly beings) also appear as ghosts, dogs or riders on horse. A further distinction is that the classic guardian angels appeared in the past, while the girl stories are not told as historical events, but as novelties.

My research into the origin and spread of the story also involved circles that did not place God, church or the clergy in the centre of storytelling, but that were clearly interested in supernatural spirits, apparitions or experiences. Why I nevertheless interpret the story of Guardian Angels as a Protestant miracle story, has to do with the cultural tradition in which it predominantly circulates and in which it performs a moral function as a 'true story'. The classic as well as the modern story type are clearly connected to the Pietistic tradition of Protestantism, more precisely with Revival movements within the churches as well as in evangelical groups. As a result of the growing application of non-oral communication (like religious press and the Internet) and perhaps also as a result of the increasing collection of circulating stories by sceptic folklorists, the stories are wider spread, but at the same time more uniform. How-

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ever, the message of the storytellers for the faithful and the unfaithful remains the same: God can, as ever, intervene in everyday life in a very realistic way in favour of children.

Finally, it is interesting that the popularity of angel stories among orthodox Protestants is in contrast with their own confessional or theological tradition. This tradition says that angels do not appear to people after the closing of the revelation, i.e. after the acceptance of the biblical canon in the post-apostolic period. In reaction to some initial publications and interviews about my research, I have even received critical remarks or angry letters from believers who considered themselves serious Calvinists, but do not know the Reformed tradition concerning this matter. Undoubtedly, this discrepancy reflects the widespread tension among Christians between unconditional faith in the historical truth of the Bible and the modern worldview that is no longer magical and religious. In these stories, the modern Christian belief in miracles apparently joins the general revival of esoterism (Köstlin 1994: 79–95; Abel 1996; Williams 2001: 46–56). Have the angels not fully returned to the culture and thus to the storytelling of the new century?

### Comments

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a monography in Dutch: see Lieburg 2000 and revised version of Fred van Lieburg “Mädchen, Vergewaltiger und Schutzengel. Die moderne Umwandlung einer protestantischen Wundergeschichte”, in: Jürgen Beyer und Reet Hiiemae (Hg.), *Folklore als Tatsachenbericht*, Tartu (Sektion für Folkloristik des Estnischen Literaturmuseums) 2001, pp. 141–161.

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